

# VFW Day Celebrates Organization's Roots

## Our commitment to our nation's veterans has never wavered

Sep 27, 2016

For 117 years, the VFW and its Auxiliary have proven that No One Does More For Veterans. From legislative activism to national veterans service, VFW continues its commitment to our nation's veterans.

That commitment began on Sept. 29, 1899, in Columbus, Ohio, when a group of veterans met to address the urgent needs of their brothers-in-arms. It's a tradition that has never wavered.

As you move forward to celebrate VFW Day 2016, reflect on the organization's roots below.

This is a firsthand account of the historic evening of Sept. 29, 1899. It was written by a founding father, James Romanis, for VFW's Golden Jubilee in 1949 and later printed in VFW magazine for the 100th anniversary. He wrote it as though he were an outside observer.

### **VFW Is Born**

**By James Romanis**

**Illustration by Jim Burke**

"The world will be kind to you for 10 days," Col. Teddy Roosevelt told the famous Rough Riders in a farewell address to his troops on Sept. 4, 1898. "Everything you do will be all

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right.

“After that you will be judged by a stricter code, and if you prove worthless, you will be considered as spoiled by going to war.”

### **Born in a Tailor Shop**

It was just about one year later, on the evening of Sept. 29, when Francis Dubiel, the proprietor of a modest tailoring store, located at 286 Main Street, Columbus, Ohio, pulled down the shades in his front door window to let his customers know that his labors for the day were over. His brow was furrowed with concentration as he stirred the fire in the pot-bellied stove in the back room.

There was an early autumn chill in the air and Dubiel was expecting company. One by one, and then in pairs, they drifted in during the next hour. Finally, 14 men (Simon Heiman, the 14th, arrived late. He had served with the 4th Ohio Volunteer Infantry on Puerto Rico.) sat about the room, the glow of the fire through the isinglass windows of the stove, and the flicker of the lone gas jet on the wall, casting fitful shadows over their somber faces.

The meeting was no casual get-together of old cronies. The very silence bespoke the serious matters that brought them into Dubiel's store. Jim Putnam, sitting next to a work table covered with unfinished orders, struck a sulfur match, and puffed with unusual vigor as he applied it to the bowl of his sturdy briar pipe. John Malloy lit a sweet caporal, sending smoke-rings curling toward the ceiling.

A tall, youthful man, one leg resting on a work bench underneath the gas light, rose to his feet to break the silence in the little room. The war with Spain had ended officially on April 11, 1899. James Romanis had recently returned with the 17th U.S. Infantry (Regiment) from its campaign on Cuba.

He looked about the group as though mentally calling the roll of other 17th Infantry vets present. There sat George Kelly and Jim Putnam. Nearby were Bert Du Rant, John Malloy and Oscar Brookins. Beyond the stove, Walker Waddington sat on a high stool, while Simon Heiman and Charles Click shared a wooden box, and David Brown, Andrew Grant, John Clark and George Beekman stood leaning against the wall under a small window. Dubiel, the store's proprietor, stood a little apart, leaning against a stack of bolted fabrics.

Far from the minds of these men at that moment were the more popular topics of the day—5-cent cigars, tandem bicycles, the new horseless carriages, the daring knee-length bathing suits and the threatening Boer War in South Africa.

### **Desperate Need**

"Men," Romanis said quietly, "you all know why we are here. We've talked about this among ourselves for several weeks now.

"Thousands of our comrades are in desperate need. Something's got to be done to help them. We've waited long enough for the government to act, but nothing's happened."

There was deep conviction, a trace of bitterness in his voice. Daily, from the window of the pharmacy where he worked, just outside the gate of Columbus Barracks, Romanis had watched the exodus of discharged veterans, many of them sick and barely able to carry their few belongings.

Confusion and uncertainty were stamped upon their faces. For many of them, their worldly goods consisted of their discharge papers and the paltry few pennies of their final pay. Their regiment had gone to Cuba and then to the Philippines.

Some of them lived in Columbus and they came to the pharmacy where Jim Romanis worked to buy quinine and other medicines in an effort to cure the recurring attacks of tropical fever, skin disease and stomach disorders brought on by eating contaminated food because of a lack of refrigeration and slow transportation.

Romanis felt a deep compassion for these "forgotten men"—his comrades who had volunteered and had fought gallantly to win the adulation of a grateful nation, only to come home and find their brave deeds forgotten, their jobs gone, their families suffering from hunger and neglect.

### **Indifferent Public**

"The public is indifferent," Romanis went on, his voice rising with his indignation. "People are too busy making money to think of veterans who can't support their families because

they are sick and unable to work. Something's got to be done to help these men."

A murmur and a nodding of heads greeted his statement. "That kind of puts it up to us, since no one else seems interested, doesn't it?" suggested lanky Jim Putnam. "It certainly does," Romanis replied, with the entire group chorusing assent. "And what's more, it's up to us also to see that this country is better prepared if we have to fight another war, or if our sons are called on to be volunteers.

"We know what happened to a lot of our men because we didn't have what was needed to protect us from the enemy. I'm convinced many of our comrades died because they weren't properly trained to take care of themselves in battle.

"I say let's form an organization, right here and right now, that will fight for proper treatment for our veterans. But let's not stop there. Let's make it an organization which will demand that our country be prepared to defend itself against any enemy in the future."

The little group listened attentively as Romanis went on. "If our organization is going to amount to anything, we have to be united in spirit as well as in purpose. We've got to think alike on the basis of our own experiences. If every man who joins our organization is entitled to wear a campaign badge, he's sure to be familiar with the exact conditions we faced during the war.

"We can't expect the comrade who served in camp here at home to understand what we went through, nor will we condemn him for that. But we want to organize an outfit that will speak for the overseas veteran. When we speak up for national defense or a fair deal for veterans, the people will know that we speak from personal experience."

Romanis summed up the outcome of the momentous meeting in these words: "We've agreed to form an organization— one that's going to live and grow long after all of us are dead and gone. This society is going to be active as long as this country of ours is forced to defend itself in hostile waters and on foreign soil.

"We have the kindest interest in the men who are not eligible to join our ranks, and shall do our utmost to protect their interests as well as the welfare of our overseas comrades. But this will be an organization of men who have survived the type of service that earns campaign medal recognition from the government of the United States.

"We pledge ourselves to work together for the benefit of our country, and for all men who are required to serve in our armed forces at home and beyond the boundaries of the United States in time of war."

## **Choosing a Name**

As Romanis concluded his remarks, Walker Waddington spoke up: “We’ve got an organization, now what about a name?” Several from the group offered suggestions, but none seemed to rightly describe the newborn society. Finally, Bert Du Rant got to his feet. “I think I’ve got it,” he said. “What about American Veterans of Foreign Service?”

“Sounds good to me,” Jim Putnam and George Kelly chorused in unison. “Me, too,” added Oscar Brookins. It was voted on with no dissents, and the name became official. Thus it was under this name that a new veterans group was chartered by the state of Ohio on Oct. 11, 1899.

*James Romanis was the first adjutant of the Columbus, Ohio-based American Veterans of Foreign Service and later commander-in-chief. He died Dec. 7, 1954 at age 76.*